

Building Blocks of Faith: The Bible
October 24, 2004
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One time, a pastor was visiting the house of some congregation members. In an effort to impress the visiting clergy, the father said to the little girl, “Honey, go get that book with the really small writing that Mommy and I like to read to you every night.” The little girl came back in a few minutes with the TV Guide.

According to a survey by the Barna Research Group, 90 percent of American households own a Bible, while only 31 percent of Americans say they read the Bible regularly. A writer once said that one of the Devil’s greatest pleasures is a dust-covered Bible. Biblical illiteracy is one of the biggest challenges facing churches today. And yet, the Bible doesn’t read like stereo instructions – insert prayer A into crisis B – so even reading it won’t necessarily guarantee a greater understanding of it. So let’s start with some basics: what’s in this book that we all claim to believe?

The Bible is made up of 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. The word “Bible” itself means “books.” The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, and was put together over the course of about 1,000 years. The New Testament was written mainly in the common form of Greek, with a little bit of Aramaic thrown in. It was written in a period of about 50 years, from 45 to 95 AD, and officially put together, made into a canon of books, in 375 AD.

The Bible has been translated into over 2000 languages, with more being done each year; by comparison, Shakespeare, considered to be the master writer of the English language, has only been translated into 50 different languages.

The Bible did not come together in the way we normally think books are written. In fact, before it was ever written down, the Bible was a collection of stories and prophecies passed down through generations. People would memorize whole books and pass them on like stories to their children and grandchildren.

It was only much later that these stories were committed to paper, and it was usually done by scribes and secretaries. In the case of older books, scribes would take the stories being told and weave them together into a book, like a quilter working with a number of different squares. What we have today is the result of the work of generations of storytellers, secretaries and editors who put these 66 books together to form our Bible.

But that was only the start of the process that has led to today’s Bible. After it was all put together, it has to be translated from its original languages. This is no easy task. For example, the Hebrew language has 22 letters in its alphabet, is read from right to left, and in its written form has neither vowels nor punctuation. Try making sense of that!

And consider that up until the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, the only way to reproduce Bibles was by hand. So for nearly 1500 years, people dedicated their lives to translating and copying the Bible letter by letter. This was seen as such a sacred task that if a manuscript contained even one error, the whole thing had to be burned. Imagine the difficulty of copying thousands of words day in and day out without errors and with no spellcheck.

It reminds me of the story of a monk who was in the process of one of these translations and reproductions. After working for awhile, he came out of his room crying

and very distraught. One of his monks friends asked him what was wrong, and he said, “I just realized the Hebrew word means “celebrate”!”

Not only was the Bible’s journey to the written page a long one, but so was its journey to the English language. In the time of the Roman Empire, the Bible was all in Greek, even the parts originally written in Hebrew, because Greek was the dominant language of the time. The Greek Bible was called the Septuigant. Once Latin became the predominant language in the 3rd century, the Bible was translated and used in Latin.

Over the next 1000 years, the Latin Bible, called the Vulgate, was the only translation used, but there came a time when Latin was no longer the predominant language; an early form of English was. But when people began to call for the Bible to be translated into English, the church resisted, saying that lay people would be led astray if they read the Scriptures on their own.

That didn’t stop a man named John Wycliffe from translating the Bible into English in 1382. This was seen as such an heretical act that not only was he arrested and his Bibles burned, but 43 years after his death, his body was exhumed and his bones were burned and tossed in a nearby river. Don’t mess with us Christians!

But the tide had started to turn. In 1521, Martin Luther translated the Bible into German, and around the same time William Tyndale translated it again into English. Gutenberg’s printing press now made it much easier to duplicate books, and the popularity of the English Bible spread until 1611, when King James I of England commissioned a group of 54 scholars to create the first official English Bible.

The King James Bible stood as the official and only English Bible until about 1952, with the creation of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. This new English version was denounced as a communist plot, because by 1952 everyone knew that God’s Word could only be truly understood was in the King James English. Or was it Latin? Or Greek? Or Hebrew?

The Revised Standard Version opened the floodgates to a host of other translations and paraphrases of the Bible, such as the New International Version (which is the version we use) and the Good News Bible. Along with these more literal translations are paraphrases like The Living Bible and The Message, which articulate God’s Word through more contemporary language.

The history of the Bible plays a large influence on what we’re supposed to do with it. One of the big debates that has divided churches for centuries is how we should interpret the Bible. Some groups say the Bible needs to be seen through the lens of history and its cultural context to be best understood; others say the Bible, as God’s Word, should be taken literally.

My response to that is simply, “Which version?” The King James? The Vulgate? The Septuigant? To claim any English Bible as our authority is to claim an interpretation of the original. Part of the process of translation is deciding if a word means this or that, depending on the sentence and the larger context. It’s a fallacy to say that what we hold in our hands today is the literal word of God. The Word of God can never be confined to any document, nor can it be understood apart from God’s Word made flesh in Jesus Christ.

Another claim about the Bible that has divided good Christians throughout history is the claim that the Bible is inerrant, that it contains no mistakes. To say this is to deny the distinctly human element of the Bible. Yes, I believe the Bible is the inspired Word of

God, but it was told, written, transcribed, translated, and copied by humans. The Bible is a divine-human collaboration.

The danger we run into by claiming to take the Bible literally or by claiming the Bible is infallible is that we lift it up to too high a pedestal in our faith. To claim that we should take the Bible literally is to put too much emphasis on the Bible and not enough on God. To claim the Bible as our only source of God's word is to deny the work of the Spirit in our lives today. God did not stop speaking at the last chapter of Revelation. God is still speaking today. To uphold the Bible as our only source of God's word is to glorify God's encounters with our ancestors while dismissing our own experiences with him today.

We do not believe in the Bible. We believe in the God attested to in the Bible. Jesus never promised us a written document; he promised us a living and active Spirit. We must be careful that we don't worship the Bible at the expense of hearing a fresh word from God, even a word that reinterprets our understanding of Scripture.

The reinterpretation of Scripture is not anti-Christian; in fact, we have it on good authority that the Scriptures should be reinterpreted to fit their current circumstances. That authority is none other than Jesus Christ himself. In Matt. 5:38, Jesus says to the crowd, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person." Now, where had the crowd heard that first statement? In the Bible, in Lev. 24:19-20. Just as Jesus reinterpreted the Bible for his situation, so we are called to use the Spirit's guidance in reinterpreting it for our own.

That's the stance our denomination has taken. We don't have an official doctrine on how the Bible is to be read. We believe it should be authoritative for Christians, but we also believe that individuals should be encouraged to interpret the scriptures in light of all the tradition and history available to them. Our goal as pastors are to equip you with the tools necessary to make your own responsible interpretation, to find out for yourself what God's word in scripture is for you.

And the true guiding light we should all use in trying to understand the Bible is simple: the Bible is to be read in light of the character of God revealed through Jesus Christ. The Bible says an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. The Bible says if a man finds something displeasing about his wife, he can divorce her and send her out of his house. The Bible says that women should keep their heads covered and their mouths shut while in church. But those statements are in direct contradiction of my understanding of a loving, merciful God who created us all equally and each with God-given gifts. The Bible is not the definitive lens through which we view the world; the love of God is. If a statement in the Bible encourages hate or exclusion or unequal treatment, then we have to be willing to say, after careful study, that we respectfully disagree.

Disagreeing with the Bible is not a sin; it's the mark of an honest, searching faith. But to agree or disagree with the Bible, you first have to read it. It would take about 70 hours to read the Bible straight through. So if you devoted 15 minutes a day to reading the Bible, you'd be done in less than a year (and that includes skipping Sundays!). If you don't know where to start, pick a Gospel. I recommend Luke. And preferably use a Study Bible, which contains helpful definitions and contextual notes for better understanding.

The Bible is a gift from God, written by humans, and brought to life by the work of the Holy Spirit. For it to be a living document, we have to be willing to let it breathe life into us and to be an authority in our lives. Its authority does not come from its

infallibility, but from the truth of its witness to the powerful love of God, which not only existed long ago with Abraham and Moses and the disciples, but which is a present reality with each of us today. We thank God for his word given to us through Scripture, and for his living Word given to us through Jesus Christ.